

## WHAT IS THE ARK OF THE COVENANT?

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The Hebrew bible states that the Ark was built by the Israelites in the Sinai Desert after they fled Egypt and its purpose was to hold the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments.

When this is rumored to have happened is up for debate, but any trace of the Ark has vanished following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

There are contrasting beliefs about what the Ark was made of and looked like, with the Book of Exodus describing a lavish chest made with gold and other precious materials.

'Have them make an ark of acacia wood — two and a half cubits [3.75 feet or 1.1 meters] long, a cubit and a half [2.25 feet or 0.7 meters] wide, and a cubit and a half [2.25 feet] high. Overlay it with pure gold, both inside and out, and make a gold molding around it.' **Exodus 25:10-11.**

It was supposedly built to be placed inside a movable shrine known as the tabernacle. A curtain prevented people from viewing the Ark of the Covenant and an altar and incense burners were placed in front of the curtain.

The incense was made of gum resin, onycham, galbanum and Frankincense and was to be burned by Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons at morning and sunset.

Exodus also mentions more details about its alleged appearance and talks about Bezalel, who was chosen by God to build the Ark.

'I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills — to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.' **Exodus 31:3-5.**

The second description of the Ark is far less ornate and describes it as being made just of wood, according to the Book of **Deuteronomy**.

This contrasting tale tells of a story where the Israelis lost their faith in God and, at one point, were worshipping a golden calf instead.

Moses became so outraged and angered by this that he smashed the existing stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed.

God promptly ordered Moses to create new tablets, also engraved with the Commandments, and build a wooden box to put them in.

'Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain. Also make a wooden ark. I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Then you are to put them in the ark.' **Deut 10:1-2.**

'So I [Moses] made the ark out of acacia wood and chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I went up on the mountain with the two tablets in my hands. The Lord wrote on these tablets what he had written before, the Ten Commandments he had proclaimed to you on the mountain....' **Deuteronomy 10:3-4.** Moses then put the tablets inside the wooden ark.

### **Magical powers and curses of the Ark**

It was claimed in the religious scripture that the Ark also had magical powers.

In one story, the Jordan River stopped flowing and remained still while a group of priests carrying the ark crossed the river. Other stories describe how the Israelites took the ark with them into battle where the powers of the ark helped the Israelites defeat their enemies.

The Ark was once captured by the Philistines and caused outbreaks of tumors and disease among the population. So bad was the pestilence that the Philistines returned it to their foe, the Israelites.

After its return, it was lowered on to its 'large stone' base which supported its mass, but some awe-struck residents of the town of Beth Shemesh made the mistake of peering inside, resulting in them being struck down by God with lightning.

This scene is recreated in the 1981 Harrison Ford film, Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark, where the faces of people looking inside melted.

Differing accounts of the Ark have led some scholars to the conclusion that there may have been more than one created.

### **What is the 'large stone'?**

The mythical 'large stone' described in the First Book of Samuel was used to hold up the Ark - a large chest containing the Ten Commandments - after it arrived at Beth Shemesh. The return to Beth Shemesh is documented in the first book of Samuel.

It states: 'Now the people of Beth Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it. Then the cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and stood there; a large stone was there. So they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the chest that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone.'

Tales of the Ark are littered through the Holy book, with many alluding to its mysterious disappearance and unknown whereabouts.

### **Where the Ark of the Covenant is - common theories**

According to the Book of Maccabees, the ark was hidden in a cave on Mount Nebo by the prophet Jeremiah.

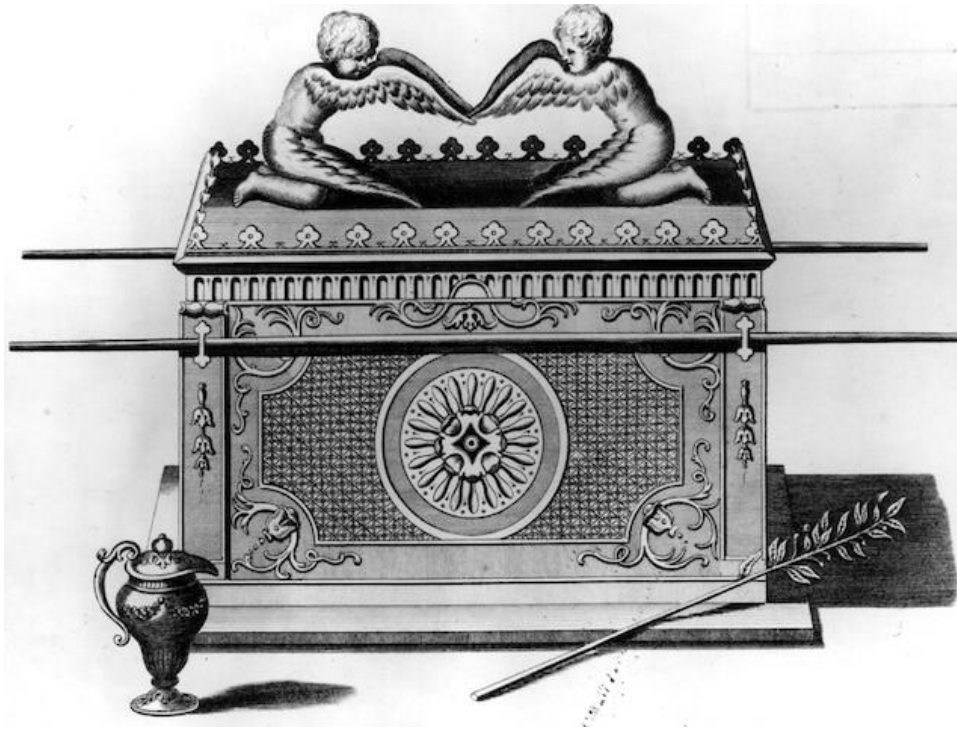
'[ This] place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy.' 2 Maccabees 2:7

The 'Treatise of the Vessels' says that the ark 'shall not be revealed until the day of the coming of the Messiah son of David....'

The Book of Revelation claims that the ark will not be seen again until the end times.

**Revelation 11:19** states: 'Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the Ark of his Covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.'

Ongoing research has looked to unearth the mysterious Ark and looked at various locations around Jerusalem.



A sketch showing what the Ark of the Covenant might have looked like.

## Why the Ark of the Covenant is one of history's enduring mysteries

*Archaeologists are skeptical that this ancient artifact can be found.*

*By Richard A. Lovett and Scot Hoffman*

For centuries, people have tried in vain to locate and recover the Bible's most sacred objects. Among the most sought-after of these religious antiquities is the famed Ark of the Covenant.

This legendary artifact is the ornate, gilded case said to have been built some 3,000 years ago by the Israelites to house the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Biblical accounts describe the Ark as large, about the size of a 19th-century seaman's chest, made of gold-plated wood, and topped with two large, golden angels. It was carried using poles inserted through rings on its sides.

The Ark has been linked to several of the Old Testament's miracles. It is said to have cleared impediments and poisonous animals from the path of the Israelites during the Exodus. When the Israelites crossed the [Jordan River](#) into the Promised Land, the Bible says that the river stopped flowing the moment the Ark-bearers set foot in it.

And many believe that when the Israelites besieged Jericho, they carried the Ark around the city for a week, blowing trumpets until, on the seventh day, the walls fell down, allowing easy conquest.

But in 597 and 586 B.C., the [Babylonian Empire](#) conquered the Israelites, and the Ark, at the time supposedly stored in the Temple in Jerusalem, vanished from history. Whether it was destroyed, captured, or hidden—nobody knows.

One of the most famous claims about the Ark's whereabouts is that before the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, it had found its way to Ethiopia, where it still resides in the town of Aksum, in the [St. Mary of Zion cathedral](#). Church authorities, however, say only one man, the guardian of the Ark, is allowed to see it, and they have never permitted it to be studied for authenticity.

Another [claim](#) is that the Ark was hidden in a warren of passages beneath the First Temple in Jerusalem before the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 B.C. But that theory can't be tested either, because the site is home to the Dome of the Rock shrine, sacred in Islam. Digging beneath it simply isn't an option.

Other more dubious claims exist, too. But perhaps the most famous quest for the Ark was on the big screen. In the 1981 movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, adventure hero Indiana Jones must find the Ark before the Nazis, who intend to use its power for world domination.

Searches for such biblical relics are compelling, says archaeologist and National Geographic Society fellow Fred Hiebert, but ultimately doomed to failure. Even if there is an ancient, Ark-like object in Ethiopia, he asks, how do you determine it's the one from the Bible?

"We are talking about things [at] the crossroads between myth and reality," he said. "I think it's great to have stories like [that of] the Ark of the Covenant. But I do not believe, as a field archaeologist, that we can use the scientific method to prove or disprove [them]."

**The first mention of the ark of the testimony** is in [Exodus 25:10](#). God gave Moses specific instructions for building a tabernacle as they traveled in the wilderness. The tabernacle would be the place where the glory of God would dwell among them ([Exodus 25:8–9](#)). Among hundreds of other descriptive instructions for this tabernacle, God told Moses to build an ark of the testimony, also called the [ark of the covenant](#) ([Exodus 25:21–22](#)). The words *testimony* and *covenant* both refer to the conditional agreement made between God and the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. An ark is, literally, a box or chest. So the ark of the testimony is the “box of the agreement.”

The ark of the testimony was a wooden box, covered in gold inside and out. It had four exterior rings through which poles could be attached for carrying. No one but the high priest could touch the ark ([Numbers 4:15](#)). To do so would result in instant death, as happened with a man named [Uzzah](#) ([2 Samuel 6:1–7](#)). God was beginning to teach His people about His holiness and their unworthiness. He demonstrated to them that His commands were not suggestions to be negotiated. He wanted to teach them to obey Him in all things, whether or not they understood the reason for the rules.

The lid of the ark was also made of gold and formed a seat between two cherubim, called the mercy seat. It was there that God would meet with His people ([Exodus 25:22](#)). Inside the ark of the testimony, Moses placed the tablets of the Law that God gave him on the mountain. The ark was placed inside the tabernacle in the most holy place, where only the high priest could go once a year ([Exodus 26:34](#)). Through it all, God was painting a picture to help us understand what is required for sinful man to come into the presence of a holy God.

The ark of the testimony got its name from the fact that it would be the housing for God’s testimony to His people. His Law was not only verbal, but written, etched in stone ([Exodus 34:28](#); [Deuteronomy 5:22](#)), so there could be no excuse for disobedience. [Hebrews 9:4](#) tells us that, later, the Israelites added to the stone tablets within the ark of the testimony a jar of manna ([Exodus 16:32–33](#)) and Aaron’s rod that budded ([Numbers 17:8–10](#)).

The ark of the testimony represented the presence of God with His people, and His power went with them wherever they took the ark ([Joshua 3:6](#); [Numbers 10:33–35](#)). The enemies of Israel, the Philistines, stole the ark once ([1 Samuel 5:1](#)), hoping its power would help them. They set it in their idol's temple and waited for the good luck it would bring. But calamity broke out among the Philistines, until they begged their leaders to send the ark back to Israel ([1 Samuel 5:4](#), [6](#), [9](#), [11–12](#)). God demonstrated that He was not a good-luck charm whose power could be had by whoever captured His ark. The power was not in the ark of the testimony itself; the ark only represented the presence of God with His people.